



MARX, ENGELS, AND THE ABOLITION OF THE FAMILY

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'It is a peculiar fact' stated Engels a few months after Marx died, 'that with every great revolutionary movement the question of 'free love' comes to the foreground'.¹ By the mid- to late-nineteenth century it was clear to advocates and opponents alike that many socialists shared a propensity to reject the institution of the family in favour of 'free love', if not in practice, at least as an ideal. The Prussian and German Reich governments tried to muzzle the socialist threat to the family by drafting legislation in 1849, 1874, 1876 and 1894, outlawing, among other things, assaults on the family.² However, the Anti-Socialist Law that Bismarck managed to pass in 1878 contained no mention of the family.

The Utopian Socialists Charles Fourier and Robert Owen had preceded Marx and Engels in their rejection of traditional family relationships, and many nineteenth-century leftists followed their cue. The most famous political leader of the German socialists, August Bebel—though he was a staunch Marxist—wrote his immensely popular book, *Die Frau und der Sozialismus*, under the influence of Fourier's ideas. However, not all socialists in the nineteenth century were anti-family. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, who wielded great influence in French socialist and anarchist circles, wanted to retain the family institution, which he loved and revered. The anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, while jettisoning most of the traditional family ties dear to Proudhon, nevertheless thought that a voluntary 'natural family' unit consisting of a man, a woman, and their children, would emerge to replace the extant legal family.

Although Marx and Engels were not the instigators of the anti-family trend among socialists, they—especially Engels—contributed mightily to it. A Prussian agent reported back to Marx's brother-in-law, the Prussian Minister of the Interior, that the German communists in London, with which Marx was associated, were 'so unusually dangerous for the state, the family and the social order'.³ Engels thrust the issue into the foreground shortly after Marx's death by publishing *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884), a work that, according to Engels, Marx had wanted to write and that reflected Marx's views. In 1895 Clara Zetkin, a leader of the socialist women's movement in Germany, praised this work as 'of the most fundamental importance for the struggle for liberation of the entire female sex'.⁴ Not only did Engels' book exert influence in the late-nineteenth century, but it has enjoyed a renaissance among contemporary socialists and feminists, though it has probably received as much criticism as praise, even among socialist feminists.

Although there were no doubts in the minds of Marx's and Engels' contemporaries that socialism was a threat not only to the state, but also to the family, some recent commentators on Marx's and Engels' view of the family cast

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doubt on their radicalism. Some construe their attacks on the family as a call for reform, as an expression of a desire to sweep away abuses, while retaining the basic family structure intact.⁵ Others discover in Engels' writings on the family naturalistic elements that allegedly vitiate his radical pronouncements on the abolition of the family.⁶ Finally, some see a contradiction between Marx's own family life and the ideals he promoted.

These interpretations of Marx's and Engels' position on the family, while often raising important points, tend to obscure somewhat the radicalism of their views. Marx's and Engels' critique of the family consisted of three main elements: (1) a depiction of the hypocrisy and inhumanity of the contemporary bourgeois family; (2) the historicisation of the family, i.e. a historical account of the origins and development of the family in the past; and (3) a vision of the future 'family' in communist society. While Marx once alluded to a higher form of the family in communist society, he and Engels usually wrote about the destruction, dissolution, and abolition of the family. The relationships they envisaged for communist society would have little or no resemblance to the family as it existed in nineteenth-century Europe or indeed anywhere else. Thus it is certainly appropriate to define their position as the abolition of the family. Only by making the term family almost infinitely elastic can they be said to have embraced merely a reformulation of the family.

As a political radical and Left Hegelian before his exposure to communist ideas in 1843–1844, Marx's view of the family was much more conventional than it would be later. In an 1842 article on the newly proposed divorce law for Prussia, he upheld the Hegelian position on marriage, which affirmed it as a moral institution. However, as a staunch opponent of Frederick William IV's attempt to establish a 'Christian state' in Prussia, he rejected the Prussian law's recognition of marriage as a religious institution.⁷ Marx argued that in its essence marriage is indissoluble, though in reality it does sometimes die. Therefore divorce should be granted at times, but instead of being arbitrary, it must simply reflect the moribund state of the marriage. Thus in 1842 Marx was certainly no proponent of easy divorce and the abolition of the family.⁸

Marx's first significant exposure to the concept of the abolition of the family probably came during his stay in Paris in 1843–1844, when he first imbibed communist ideas and held long discussions with numerous socialists and other radicals who congregated in the French capital. Charles Fourier's ideas played a significant role in the socialist movement in France in the 1830s and 1840s and his ideas on the family were propagated in the first volume of the *Oeuvres Complètes* published in 1841. Fourier advocated the replacement of monogamous marriage with a system allowing much greater latitude for sexual passions, since he believed that monogamy was an institution contrary to human nature and was thus an impediment to human happiness. He also proposed that children be raised communally, so society would be one, big, harmonious family rather than fractured into competitive, squabbling family units.⁹

Although Marx had little use for many of Fourier's ideas (indeed Fourier's own disciples were somewhat selective in their adoption of their visionary leader's proposals), they forced him to grapple with the issue of the family and provided him with ammunition with which to criticise present institutions. In *The German Ideology* (1845–1846) Marx and Engels showed their acquaintance with

Fourier's critique of marriage by defending Fourier against an alleged misinterpretation of Karl Grün. However, Marx and Engels were probably just as mistaken as Grün in their interpretation of Fourier.¹⁰ Fourier's ideas remained with Marx even after he wrote *Capital*, since he alluded to a Fourierian principle concerning women's position in society in a letter written in 1868 and toward the end of his life referred to Fourier in his notes on Morgan's *Ancient Society*.¹¹ In another passage in *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels asserted that both French and English socialists were pressing for the dissolution of the family.¹² This implies some knowledge, however cursory it may have been, of Robert Owen's disdain for the family as an institution, since he was the foremost English socialist to attack the family.¹³

There is no doubt that Engels' understanding of family relationships was strongly influenced by Fourier and Owen.¹⁴ In *Anti-Dühring*, which was Engels' most influential work, he lavished praise on both socialists for their views on the family. He considered Owen's writings on marriage among his most important works. Concerning Fourier he wrote, 'Even more masterful is his critique of the bourgeois form of sexual relationships and the position of the woman in bourgeois society'.¹⁵ While working on *The Origin of the Family* in 1884, he wrote to Karl Kautsky that Fourier had brilliantly anticipated Morgan in many matters.¹⁶ Indeed Engels originally intended his book to be a comparison of Fourier's, Morgan's, and his own ideas, but time constraints forbade this.¹⁷

Another important factor in Marx's intellectual development in the early 1840s was his adoption of Feuerbach's transformative criticism of Hegel, whereby he inverted the subject and predicate of Hegel's idealist philosophy, i.e. thought as the subject and existence as the predicate. Feuerbach further argued that God was merely the hypostatization of the ideal human and thus theology could be reduced to anthropology. He believed that humans created God in their own image as a consequence of human alienation. Marx took Feuerbach's analysis a step—actually a giant leap—further by applying it to human institutions, including the family. If the concrete individual and existence precede the idea of institutions, then these ideals are no longer sacrosanct, but merely the reflection of extant alienation, which Marx considered primarily economic in origin. In the 'Theses on Feuerbach' Marx made clear what the future of the family would be once alienation was overcome: 'Therefore after, for example, the earthly family is discovered as the secret of the holy family, the former must itself be theoretically and practically destroyed'.¹⁸ Even though it was indirect, Feuerbach's contribution to Marx's view of the family was crucial.

After they adopted a communist position in 1843–1844, Marx and Engels were unrelenting in their assault on the contemporary condition of the family. Engels was more zealous in this battle than his colleague, and he fired the first salvos in an 1844 article published by Marx in the *Deutsch-französische Jahrbücher* and then more substantially in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845). In his article Engels claimed that the factory system was already contributing to the dissolution of the family, especially through its demand for child labour.¹⁹ His book amplified this theme and provided poignant examples of the experiences of working-class families to show the depths of degradation and demoralisation into which the factory system had plunged them. He depicted the noxious hovels that made a home life impossible, the neglect of children because the fathers and

mothers worked in the factories, and other demoralising factors that already spelled doom for the family.²⁰ Although Marx provided copious evidence in *Capital* to expose the abominable conditions of women and children in British factories, only once did he explicitly link this with the dissolution of the family.

Although Marx was generally less eager to address the issue of marriage and family relations than was Engels, the most vitriolic attack on the bourgeois family ideal produced by the pair came from Marx's pen. Although jointly written, the final draft of *The Communist Manifesto* was composed by Marx. Engels' draft included a section on the communist view of the family, and this provided the impetus for Marx to address the issue. However, Marx departed widely from Engels' text by severely castigating the bourgeois conception of the family. Marx lampooned the bourgeoisie for its hypocrisy in presenting the family as a sacred institution based on familial love: 'The bourgeoisie has torn away from the family relationship its sentimental veil and has reduced it to a mere money relationship'.²² In a scathing rebuke, he further blamed the bourgeoisie and the capitalist system for the absence of the family among the proletariat, for the exploitation of children, for prostitution, and for the sexual exploitation of women and girls in the factories.²³ Marx and Engels had previously levelled many of these criticisms at the bourgeoisie in *The German Ideology*, but it remained unpublished during their lives.²⁴

Indeed Fourier preceded Marx and Engels in his exposition of the hypocrisy of his society upholding conventional sexual mores and the sanctity of the family institution. Owen had already pointed out certain inhumane conditions in working-class families. However, Marx and Engels contributed significantly to the anti-family critique by amassing a mountain of empirical data demonstrating that in nineteenth-century capitalist society, the working-class family was in disarray. They left no hope of its recovery from its death throes.

Perhaps an even more powerful critique of the family than their depiction of the hypocrisy and degradation of the contemporary institution was their historicisation of the family. Without this element, their exposé of the horrific conditions confronting the contemporary family could be construed as a call to return to traditional family values, which were being overturned by modern industry.²⁵ This is how the Tories read the parliamentary reports uncovering the inhumane conditions in the factories, from which Marx gleaned so much of his material for *Capital*. Marx and Engels, however, rejected the appeal to an absolute norm for families by addressing three aspects of the historicity of the family. First, they provided a theory of the origin of the family. Secondly, they asserted that the family had developed through various forms during the preceding historical stages, making the bourgeois model merely its latest transitory manifestation. Finally, they insisted that the transformations in the family were primarily precipitated by economic forces. There were significant alterations in their treatment of all three topics following their reading of Morgan's *Ancient Society*, but these shifts did not modify their contempt for the bourgeois family nor their vision of future social relations.

Although Fourier had advanced a theory of the origin and historical development of the family, Marx and Engels did not embrace his views. In *Théorie des quatre mouvements* Fourier had outlined his view of human history,